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ABSTRACT

The laboratory school for Southeast Missouri State University offers individualized French and Spanish second language instruction to secondary students by scheduling them together in one multilevel class. Students progress individually and in small groups through planned, self-paced, continuous progress programs. Each student is given a checklist for each new core lesson, which contains oral, reading, and writing exercises, workbook activities, comprehension items, quizzes, and tests. Supporting audiovisual materials are available. Long-term contracts detailing the students' obligations and "compensations" are negotiated each quarter, and short-term contracts concerning homework, speaking and reading exercises, quizzes, tests, and other obligations are negotiated daily or weekly. The advantages are that students can pursue second languages despite low enrollments, the advanced language levels of all students allow exclusive use of the target language, and students learn from other students at other levels and in another language. These interactions often prompt basic sociolinguistic discussions and third-language enrollments. Administrators like the flexibility of the program, and students and parents like both the approach and the information provided them by the contracts. An important consideration is that the approach requires overt commitment and concentrated skills and effort from the teacher to orchestrate a complex teaching situation. (MSE)

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Teaching Multi-Level Classes: A Lesson from the Past

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Multi-level classes continue to be a problem for foreign language teachers. With increased emphasis on an extended period of foreign language study, the number of multi-level classes may actually be increasing, especially in small schools or schools with low enrollment in one or more language offerings. Individualized instruction, a little-used model from the 1970s, deserves another look, especially with respect to its possible value as a tool in the multi-level classroom.

Individualized instruction as a topic for writers in foreign language education is clearly passé. A manual search of 300 articles published in five major foreign language education journals revealed only two titles that made reference to individualized instruction.[1] A search of the 1985 edition of *Books in Print* revealed no new titles of books from this decade devoted to individualized instruction, with the exception of the proceedings of the second and third national conferences on individualized instruction sponsored by the College of Humanities of The Ohio State University (Ervin, 4; Lacey, 5).

Although interest in the topic may have atrophied in the literature, one must not assume that the same situation exists in language classrooms. Individualized instruction is alive and well in at least one setting where it has allowed a multi-level foreign language program to thrive in spite of enormously limiting circumstances. This paper will briefly describe that program, suggest means for adapting it in other settings, and provide teachers at least one model for managing multi-level advanced classes.

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Program Description

The University School is the laboratory school for the teacher education program of Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau. Six-year sequences in both French and Spanish are offered to a pool of fewer than 200 students from grades 7–12, with only one teacher. While beginning classes have consistently enjoyed more than satisfactory enrollments (especially compared to other elective subjects), a variety of factors has limited the enrollment in advanced courses. Having to choose from two language offerings divides the pool of talented, resourceful, and motivated students. Competition comes from core subjects required for graduation (e.g., two-credit requirements in both science and math), as well as from other equally attractive elective programs. A six-period day limits flexibility in the master schedule, a situation compounded by numerous one-section offerings in both core and elective subjects. In addition, juniors and seniors may opt to take college courses for either high school or college credit. These factors and others, some endemic to small schools and some peculiar to this lab school, have served to limit flexibility and to make scheduling an administrative nightmare (for further discussion, see Book, 1; 2; 3).

From an administrative perspective, the solution to these problems is deceptively simple. Students beyond first year, regardless of their age or the language being studied, are permitted to schedule "Advanced Foreign Language" during the hours in which this "dummy" course appears in the master schedule. An eighth grader in second-year French may, therefore, be continuing his or her studies along with a junior in third-year Spanish. In fact, one such class (affectionately known as a "zoo class") offered two levels of Spanish and four levels of French to nine students in one hour. The offering of such multi-level courses provides the kind of flexibility in scheduling essential to program success (for further details, see especially Book, 2).

Such multi-level classes would be impossible without an individualized instruction framework. Students progress on individual and small-group bases through planned programs of studies (individualized pacing) at a minimum proficiency of 80 percent (continuous progress). Each student is given a checklist for each new core lesson. This list contains the oral, reading, speaking, and writing exercises, as well as any workbook

activities, listening comprehension items, quizzes, and tests that the lesson may include. Tapes for oral practice, vocabulary cue cards, movies, filmstrips, and reference materials are available as needed to support and complement these activities. When a student's first attempt at a given item does not meet the minimum acceptable standard, remediation activities are available.

The concept of individualized pacing implies that students may progress through an appropriate level of study at their own optimum rates. In this multi-level program, student progress is clarified, delineated, and assured by two kinds of contracts that they negotiate.

Long-term contracts that detail students' obligations and subsequent "compensation" are negotiated each quarter. Contracts are sufficiently flexible to allow for true individualization of instruction. Students pursue individual interests and maximize given talents: students have contracted, for example, to read novels, write short stories, and compose notional/functional units for other students (e.g., how to obtain a driver's license). One student arranged to program some French lessons on a microcomputer. These contracts are renegotiable, up or down.

Short-term contracts are also negotiated on a daily/weekly basis. These contracts concern homework, speaking and reading exercises, quizzes, tests, and other such obligations. Students have considerable flexibility as they make these decisions, taking into account their other classes and commitments to extracurricular and non-school activities. All students are given Student Planners, which are teacher-made calendars for each quarter in its entirety, showing how many class days are available, which days are reserved for language-specific interaction sessions or for sessions with the entire group, and which days the instructor might be out of town or otherwise unavailable. The checklist for each core lesson serves as a planning aid for students and also facilitates record-keeping.

Outcomes

Several positive outcomes have emerged directly from this approach. Foremost among them is that students have the opportunity to continue their language studies in spite of low enrollments. The advanced levels of all students permit the use of target languages exclusively, both between students and teacher and among students. Students of one language often

watch, listen, and compare notes as students of the other language examine structures, participate in conversation activities, or discuss aspects of the target culture. These observations often provide opportunities for impromptu, albeit rudimentary, comparative sociolinguistics. Several students in advanced levels of one language have subsequently enrolled in the beginning level of the other language. Some of these have then enrolled the next year in both advanced French and advanced Spanish within the same class period. School administrators have appreciated the flexibility in master schedule construction, the reduction in number of schedule conflicts, and the increased likelihood of meeting students' requests for advanced language study.

The approach has been well received by both students and their parents. Students have commented positively about the fairness of the continuous progress grading system; the flexibility of the short-term contracts; the lively, unstructured, spontaneous atmosphere in the classroom; and the opportunities to progress toward linguistic competence at their own rates. Parents like long-term contracts that help them stay informed of the progress of their children.

Some Caveats

Some cautions are in order. The format is in no way presented here as a panacea. Foreign language educators who consider an individualized approach to multi-level classes should be aware of some limiting, if not negative, factors. First, an individualized approach is impossible without an expressed, overt commitment to the philosophy behind individualized pacing and instruction. Teachers must believe that the concept will work, or else it is futile to try. Second, classes organized on such a basis require much more energy and concentrated effort than teacher-centered situations. The continuous shifts from one language to another are hard work. At the same time, using target languages in this manner demonstrates that such shifting is possible and can be fun. Third, removing the teacher from the center of the day's activities requires a stronger grasp of the subject matter than in teacher-centered approaches, since the student questions are often spontaneous and impromptu, and explanations are harder to anticipate. Using the target languages so extensively requires considerable linguistic skill on the instructor's part, suggesting that an individualized

approach may not be advisable for inexperienced teachers. Fourth, the amount of paperwork is enormous. Correcting homework, writing exercises, quizzes, and tests is never ending, and record-keeping is a much more complicated procedure than in other approaches. In addition, preparing and duplicating checklists, calendars, multiple forms of quizzes and tests, as well as negotiating (and often renegotiating) long-term and short-term contracts are enormous consumers of time and energy.

A final caveat deserves attention from those attracted to such a multi-level program. One might label this consideration "ego problems." In individualized situations, the teacher no longer dominates the day's learning activities. Rather, he or she becomes a facilitator, advisor, diagnostician, and/or counselor. The teacher is no longer the primary motivator; the language is. The performance aspect of the teaching craft is gone. The teacher has fewer chances to present new material, to entertain, or to hold the attention of a group of students. The personal experience of this author is that the loss of opportunities to perform is one of the greater drawbacks of the individualized approach.

Conclusion

In spite of these limiting factors, experience has shown that such an individualized format offers a reasonable, workable alternative for multi-level advanced classes. Programs that, for whatever reasons, have struggled to achieve the "magic" enrollment numbers at advanced levels may wish to consider adapting the format presented here, one that provides opportunities for smaller groups of students to continue their language studies. Teachers who are uncomfortable with multi-level advanced classes within the same class period might adopt the contract system as an alternative to dividing their instructional time between or among the levels involved. Administrators might examine the feasibility of such multi-level scheduling in order to extend and expand curricular offerings in foreign languages.

Experience has shown that these multi-level programs need considerable management and attention. Students need the kind of structure provided from planning aids, but they also need occasional gentle reminders from their teachers about responsible use of the time available to them. Proper planning, however, can ensure a lively, spontaneous classroom

atmosphere in which the pleasure of acquiring additional language skills is evident. While there is a need for teachers to invest considerable time, energy, and skill in such a program, the rewards are tangible and real.

Notes

1. The five journals are: *Foreign Language Annals*, *Modern Language Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Hispania*, and *French Review*. The two articles are: Leon J. Twarog and E. Garrison Walters, "Mastery-based, Self-paced Instruction in Foreign Languages at Ohio State University: A Report to the Profession on a Four Year Experiment in Individualized Instruction in Six Foreign Languages," *Modern Language Journal* 65 (1981): 1–23; and Virginia Benmanan, Suzanne Moore, George Morgan, and Peter Rowe, "Individualized Spanish at an Undergraduate Institution: Implementation and Evaluation," *Modern Language Journal* 66 (1982): 150–154.

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1. Book, Leon C. "Continuous Progress, Individualized Pacing, and Foreign Languages: Fighting the Numbers Game." *National Association of Laboratory Schools Journal* 7, iii (1982): 1–5.
2. _____. "Flexibility: The Key to Program Success," pp. 37–58 in Douglas N. Lacey, ed., *Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Individualized Instruction in Foreign Languages*. Columbus, OH: College of Humanities, The Ohio State University, 1984.
3. _____. *Saving Lower-Enrollment, Advanced-Level Elective Programs: A Way to Get Blood from Turnips*. Cape Girardeau, MO: Southeast Missouri State University, 1985. [ED 242 062.]
4. Ervin, Gerard L., ed. *Proceedings of the Second National Conference on Individualized Instruction in Foreign Languages*. Columbus, OH: College of Humanities, The Ohio State University, 1981.
5. Lacey, Douglas N., ed. *Proceedings of the Third National Conference on Individualized Instruction in Foreign Languages*. Columbus, OH: College of Humanities, The Ohio State University, 1984.